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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1261
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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: GSE DETAINS ERITREAN JOURNALISTS

Classified By: AMB Scott H. DeLisi, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Since the beginning of November, the Government of the State of Eritrea (GSE) has detained at least nine employees of the Ministry of Information (MOI). Both the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists and Reporters Without Borders have picked up the story and publicly commented on the detentions. According to Embassy sources, the individuals remain in detention under suspicion that they were planning to defect from Eritrea. With these arrests, the GSE continues its pattern of harassment of journalists and the media begun in 2001; however the detention of Eritrean journalists working for the state-controlled media suggests that "in-house" loyalties are not enough to protect them from GSE suspicions. End Summary.

NINE MOI EMPLOYEES REPORTEDLY IN DETENTION

¶2. (C) On November 22, Reporters Without Borders claimed that nine employees of Eritrea's Ministry of Information had been arrested by the government. The press release quoted a local source who said "those arrested were taken to a detention center at Agip (5 km south of Masawa)." The details of the arrests and detentions remain hazy. Post has confirmed the detention of five of the nine individuals. When questioned by the resident AFP stringer, Minister of Information Ali Abdu was dismissive, commenting that "he" had not been arrested; that it "was a routine investigation"; and that the individuals "were released". (Comment: Despite Mr. Abdu's statement, post confirmed that at least five of the individuals remain incarcerated. End Comment.)

¶3. (C) While the reasons for the arrests remain unexplained by the GSE, the Asmara rumor mill alleges that some or all of the employees were planning to defect from Eritrea. Local reports maintain that the GSE believed that the detainees were involved in or aware of the defection plans and hoped to elicit details from them while in custody.

¶4. (C) The rumor mill speculation links to reports that since October a number of MOI employees have reportedly sought asylum abroad. According to the source cited in the Reporters Without Borders press release, "the government is in a state of maximum alert following the recent defections of a number

of veteran journalists holding key posts within the information ministry." Post is aware of one confirmed case of recent defection. In October 2006, the Director of the English Desk at the MOI, Temesgen Debessai, failed to return from his trip to Bahrain. According to the British Embassy in Asmara, he filed a request with the British Embassy in Bahrain for family reunification to join his wife, who previously had received asylum in the UK. A well-respected and praised journalist, Debassai's defection is rumored to have upset many in the GSE.

15. (C) MOI employees face additional scrutiny by the GSE because of their public visibility. The resident Reuters stringer told poloff that MOI employees have told him that they are afraid. These MOI employees were apparently told by a fellow worker that the GSE was monitoring their phone conversations and activities over the past few months. The Norwegian Charge, a long-term diplomat in Asmara, told poloff that even journalists who are family members of high level government officials are not exempt from detention. According to the Charge, Weini Ghebregiabhier, a well-known journalist and the wife of Yemane Ghebreab (the political chief of the People's Front for Democracy and Justice and a key presidential advisor) has been detained at least twice in the past 18 months.

HARASSMENT OF JOURNALISTS ... OLD NEWS IN ASMARA

16. (C) The GSE's dislike of journalists and free media is well-known. Eritrea has the dubious distinction of being regularly ranked in the bottom five worst countries for free press by various human rights and free press watchdog organizations. In 2001, when the GSE infamously arrested and detained the G-11 (eleven government ministers who expressed opposition to the GSE), the GSE also clamped down on the free press. Over the course of several months in late 2001, all of the private media outlets were shut down and at least 15 journalists arrested, including the Swedish-Eritrean journalist Dawit Issak. Since 2001, the GSE has continued to commit egregious human rights violations, including the arbitrary arrest, detention and torturing of citizens and has placed severe restrictions on freedom of speech and the press. Public allegations of these human rights violations and other negative actions of the GSE generally only come to light after an individual has successfully escaped from Eritrea and can make these charges from the safety of a third country.

17. (C) In October, the GSE granted permission for the entry of two foreign national reporters, a British citizen working for Agence France-Presse (AFP) and a U.S. citizen working for Reuters. These are the first foreign journalists who have been permitted in-country since the departure of the previous AFP and Reuters stringers in July. The previous Reuters reporter, a British national, was "frozen" and told he could not report for nearly seven weeks in May and June following an article on food security. He told poloff that he estimated that during the 18 months in country, he was "frozen" three times for various lengths of time. Despite the GSE's clear discomfort with his presence in-country, when he subsequently requested permission to depart Eritrea permanently, the GSE would not approve his exit visa, thereby delaying his departure for nearly three weeks. The GSE expelled another Reuters reporter in December 2004 after he wrote a negatively perceived article on human rights. Since 2001, the GSE has accused most of the foreign journalists based in Eritrea of spying for the United States and have periodically prevented them from reporting.

18. (C) Comment: The arbitrary arrest of Eritrean citizens by the government is an on-going practice, however the targeting of such a large number of employees of a specific government Ministry is a new turn of events. In these cases, we suspect that the GSE may be particularly concerned that further defections from the GSE's own journalist corps may "release" too many articulate and credible voices capable of sharing

with the diaspora and international community the "rest of
the story". End Comment.
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